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Witkacy's Pure Form and the Concept of the Sublime

... The relation of art to an audience understood to be passive, inert, surfeited, can only be assault. Art becomes identical with aggression.

S. Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible...

... If the theatre is ... bloody and inhuman, it is ... to manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of a perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated ...

A. Artaud, *The Theatre of Cruelty*
First Manifesto

We must unleash the slumbering Beast and see what it can do. And if it runs mad, there will be always time enough to shoot it

S.I. Witkiewicz, *On a New Type of Play*

Theatre in Pure Form, whose artistic potential Witkacy compares to the latent force of the slumbering beast, was proclaimed by his contemporaries, almost in unison, an apology of nonsense or, at best, an implicit parody of some modes of thinking¹. However, in the course of its reception Witkacy's idea of Pure Form in theatre has become a dynamic link in the network of post-war avant-garde. It can be related there to the Theatre of the Absurd, the Theatre of Cruelty, Craig's wholistic concept of *mise-en-scène*, to name but a few.

¹ Cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma w teatrze* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1986), pp. 6—8.

In view of the fact that Witkacy himself found only four of his plays the most complete, still not utterly satisfying, realisations of Pure Form in theatre,² Witkacy's idea can be considered primarily as a point of direction, an ideal the movement towards which is a value in itself and whose various aspects still can be actualised.

What is to be focused on in our presentation of Pure Form is its relation to the concept of the sublime. We want (1) to show theatre in Pure Form as productive of what Burke calls "the strongest emotion of the mind", i.e. the feeling of the sublime³ and (2) to consider the process of "sublimation" of the theatrical performance due to which it can be viewed as an instance of Pure Form.

In chemical terminology "to sublime" means "to convert from a solid state to vapour by heat and allow to solidify again (in order to purify it)"⁴ and "sublimate" substance is "refined" substance that is "free from other substances, made pure"⁵.

The use of chemical terminology is not based on the similarity of the word-forms constituted by the same root ("sublim-e" and "sublim-ation") and possibly chance convergence of the terms in the dictionary definitions (to sublime — to purify; sublimate (substance) — pure (substance)). The fact is that the chemical process of sublimation can be viewed as a sort of metaphor for the constitutive processes of the theatrical performance in Pure Form.

The two directions of our presentation reflect, in fact, the co-existence of the terms "esthetic" and "artistic", conventionally referred to the act of perception and creation respectively. The separate uses of the two terms, when a work of art is viewed not as a ready-made object, but a product of the act of perception⁶, can point to "the absence of the adequate term designating the two processes taken together"⁷; on the other hand, that can be a conscious move intended to emphasise two modes of existence of a work of art: the effect it evokes in the perceiver (the esthetic aspect) and the way it is constituted in the act of perception (the artistic aspect). Thus, in our presentation, both the esthetic and artistic belong to the art of creation in perception.

The main body of the paper delineated above is followed by a sort of afterthought on the possible overlapping of Pure Form and the concept of the sublime in relation to Peirce's category of Firstness.

² Cf. D. C. Gerould, *The Madman and Other Plays by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973), pp. 299—300.

³ Cf. E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London: 1812), p. 58.

⁴ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* [emphasis added].

⁵ *Ibid.* [emphasis added].

⁶ Cf. K. Rosner, "Udział semiotyki dwudziestowiecznej w przemianie paradygmatu pojęć estetycznych", *Studia Semiotyczne*, vol. XIV—XV (Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), pp. 335, 337, 339.

⁷ Cf. J. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), p. 46.

I

Burke calls pain and pleasure positive feelings, which means they are not dependant on each other for their existence. He denies that pain arises from the removal of some pleasure and points to a state of indifference as the neutral sphere between the two extremes⁸. He distinguishes at the same time pleasure that cannot exist without a relation to pain and uses "the term delight to express the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger"⁹. Whatever excites delight is a source of the sublime — "it is productive of the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling"¹⁰. However, Burke states also that whatever excites the idea of pain and danger is a source of the sublime¹¹ and "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close"¹². Pain and pleasure, and any modifications of those have as their source the ideas possibly reduced to two heads: self-preservation and society. It is the passions which concern self-preservation, which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, that turn chiefly on pain or danger¹³.

In view of Dewey's presentation of life-sustaining mechanisms the theatrical performance in Pure Form can be shown as exciting the idea of threat to man's instinct of self-preservation, and as such, productive of the feeling of the sublime.

As Dewey delineates it the living creature remains in constant interaction with its environment. Life continues and expands overcoming factors of opposition and conflict. Equilibrium is reached out of, and because of, tension. The rhythm of life is the rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union. The moments of loss of integration are not holes, but places of rest, pauses, which are ultimately overcome¹⁴. However, the pause when prolonged beyond the safe point at which the recovery of union is still possible, spells death, the ultimate, irreversible break. The time of approaching that point is the time of growing tension that becomes, however, a part of conscious experience only when it is overcome. You cannot experience nothingness, you can only have an idea of it. The phases of loss of integration are present to the consciousness only as ideas of danger, since the moment they are realized the danger is overcome. The fact that the moments which, when prolonged, spell death are inherent to the rhythm of life as a whole can point to Dewey's opposition of pleasure and delight as similar conceptually to that formulated by Burke. Dewey distinguishes pleasure that may come about by chance contact and delight that comes to be through a sort of fulfilment, an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence¹⁵.

⁸ Cf. E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry...*, p. 44.

⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹² Ibid., p. 73.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 57, 58.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Dewey, *Art...*, pp. 14—15.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

The experience of life as such is, then, the experience of ultimate harmony "coming" out of successive phases of union and disjunction, the experience of unity achieved through interaction of opposed energies, a resultant of suspense between reciprocal resistances.

The "theatrical reality" — the possible world of the theatrical performance (W_{TP})¹⁶ appears as a fictive world due to theatrical and dramatic conventions. As Peirce claims "(t)he real world cannot be distinguished from a fictitious world by any description ... This exemplifies the necessity of indicating that the real world is meant if it be meant ... and this world like a fictitious world requires an index to distinguish it"¹⁷.

Witkacy insists that the possible world of the theatrical performance in Pure Form (W_{PF}) is to be the world with which "on the realistic level we have no contact"¹⁸; the possible world of the theatrical performance in Pure Form is the world "free from causality found in real life"; it is "the whole whose meaning would ... not be defined by the demands of consistent psychology and action according to assumptions from real life", in which "the fantastic psychology of characters ... who are ... completely unlike people in real life produce events ... not limited to any logic"¹⁹.

Any kind of reality is constituted by the principles synthesizing its elements. Wittgenstein goes as far as to find the very idea of elements existing out of the system contradictory; since being as such consists in the relations among elements²⁰.

Theatre does not have its own intrinsic, homogeneous elements like the pure arts: Painting and Music²¹. Kowzan specifies thirteen sign-systems operating in theatre²². However, "the theatre without the characters who act, no matter how outrageously and improbably, is inconceivable"²³. The elements of theatre are not exclusively simple signs of Kowzan's typology, but the compounds of growing complexity that inevitably form the content of human action of which theatre can be independent only in its final result²⁴. However, "reality is more

¹⁶ Throughout this paper, for the sake of brevity, the possible world of the theatrical performance and the spectator's actual world are marked (W_{TP}) and (W_O) respectively, cf. K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 103. Consequently, the possible world of the theatrical performance in Pure Form is abbreviated (W_{PF}).

¹⁷ Ch. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. I—VI, ed. Hartshorne and P. Weiss; vols. VII—VIII, ed. W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931—1958). According to the established practice in Peirce's scholarship, the main body of his published writings — *Collected Papers*, are referred to by volume and paragraph number and abbreviated CP. CP, 2.337.

¹⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 91; D.C. Gerould, *The Madman...*, p. 296. While quoting Witkacy, we use Daniel Gerould's translation of Witkacy's writings and refer particular quotations both to the English translation and the Polish original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78; 292, 293.

²⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Dociekania filozoficzne*, trans. B. Wolniewicz (Warszawa: PWN, 1972), p. 40.

²¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 78; D.C. Gerould, *The Madman...*, p. 293.

²² See K. Elam, *The Semiotics...*, p. 50.

²³ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 78; D.C. Gerould, *The Madman...*, p. 293.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 76; p. 292.

than the matter of discrete events occurring at given points in space-time. Reality is a matter of relations between them"²⁵. Therefore, it is not the mere presence of the stage of fantastic element that makes "the contact on the realistic level" impossible for the audience, but sort of relations between realistic or fantastic elements that violate the norms of everyday life experience²⁶. Those norms, which are, in fact, synthesizing principles of the spectator's actual world (W_o) can be depicted as: "cultural, epistemological, ethical principles ... through which we make sense of our lives ... all the logical truths of W_o, its physical and psychological laws, including the laws of cause and effect, necessity and possibility, etc"²⁷. If life-principles in the sense specified above are responsible for the synthesizing process of the theatrical performance as a global sign, the possible world of that performance can be viewed as a representation of W_o. That comes as a consequence of the emphasis put on the view of the reality as a matter of relations among its constituent parts.

What happens in Witkacy's theatre is that life-principles do operate there on a limited scale, but they are not responsible for the synthesizing process of the theatrical performance as a global sign. However, the performance, to become an integrated whole, must possess some kind of internal organization, but that happens on the level of so-called "formal necessity"²⁸. The theatrical performance in Pure Form is "the whole whose meaning is defined by its purely scenic internal construction", "purely formal complications of sound patterns as well as psychological and decorative ones", it is to be governed by "the logic of the form itself of that performance"²⁹.

The concept of form is not explicit and a comprehensive approach to it goes beyond the limits of our presentation. Some elementary remarks on the subject precede the discussion of Witkacy's notion: "the logic of the form" in part 2. For the purposes of the following argument we find it sufficient to specify our use of the expressions like "the purely formal level" and "purely formal complications".

Witkacy defines form as the principle through which complex objects and phenomena get united. Unity in Variety and Variety in Unity, comprehended as the unity imposed on the variety of elements and the heterogeneous character of any entity respectively, are inseparable aspects of any existence³⁰. Form, as the unifying principle, conditions being,

²⁵ J. Zeman, "The Esthetic Sign in Peirce's Semiotics", *Semiotica* 19 (1977), pp. 241—258.

²⁶ Jennings discussing the concept of "the grotesque" states that the fact that in fairy-tales animals talk cannot be called grotesque — as it is conditioned by the conventions of the literary genre. The grotesque hinges upon transgression of the constitutive principles, i.e. logical norms of the reader's world. cf. L.B. Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon. Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 358, 359.

²⁷ K. Elam. *The Semiotics...*, pp. 52, 103, 104.

²⁸ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 79; D.C. Gerould, *The Madman...*, p. 294.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78, 82; 292, 293, 296.

³⁰ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 39.

i.e. anything that exists, exists through and because of its form. It seems that consistency of a sign is the semiotic equivalent of form: "(c)onsistency belongs to every sign so far as it is a sign and, therefore, every sign since it signifies primarily that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency"³¹. However, while each sign signifies primarily that it is a sign, to manifest, in a direct way the principle of Unity in Variety and Variety in Unity is to be the only function of a work of art³². In other words, a work of art is defined through its function, that is, as an object or phenomenon which signifies exclusively its own unity. That corresponds largely to Dewey's view, that: "a work of art accentuates its being a whole" and "in a distinctively esthetic experience characteristics that are subdued in other experiences are dominant: those that are subordinate are controlling — namely, the characteristics in virtue of which the experience is an integrated complete experience on its own account"³³.

In view of the above considerations the "purely formal complications" or "the purely formal level of perception" can be related to the distinctively esthetic situation when the dominant aspect of a given object or phenomenon is its unity, and all other meanings are excluded or subdued.

Theatrical performance in Pure Form becomes, then, consistent only on the level that, while following Witkacy, one can call the formal one. However, it can be presumed that because of the suggestive presence on the stage of the elements, agents of Wo there are repeated attempts on the part of the audience to establish some kind of order in terms of life-logic. WP_F still creates an illusion that it can be constituted as a representation of Wo and as such launches the operation of life-principles that cannot be, however, carried on beyond certain point. It is only when the connections governed by life-principles cannot be established that the purely formal connections become the alternative. In other words, the formal relations come to the foreground only when the relations constituted by life-principles are not applicable at a given moment.

The shift to the purely formal level of perception is always a dramatic attempt of overcoming the phase of irreversible disjunction equivalent with death, ultimate annihilation; therefore it brings an idea of extreme danger, which according to Burke always excites delight, and as such, is productive of the feeling of the sublime.

II

The partial answer to the question about the "sublimation" of the theatrical performance is included in the above considerations: life-principles operate

³¹ CP, 5.313.

³² Cf. S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, pp. 39, 42.

³³ J. Dewey, *Art...*, pp. 55, 195.

in the theatrical performance in Pure Form on a limited scale, and as such, they are not responsible for the constitution of that performance as a global sign. That is a sort of "a negative definition" — the definition based on the elimination of some features or processes. What still requires more attention is the concept of "the logic of the form", which seems essential for the comprehension of the constitutive processes of Pure Form.

As we have already stated the main difficulty about the concepts like "the logic of the form" or "the formal connections" comes from the confusion about the term "form" itself.

Traditionally, form is defined as "an arrangement of the constituents", "the contour" or "what is directly given to the senses"³⁴. The concept of "form" usually raises the question about its opposite: matter, substance, content. What Kant says about the formal or material elements depends upon the level of application of the form-matter distinction, namely, if it is the level of judgements, cognitions, intuitions or sensations³⁵. However, in each of the four applications "the matter or content consists of certain elements and the form is the manner in which or the structure in terms of which these elements are related to one another"³⁶. "Form is always relating the elements in such a way as to give them unity"³⁷; still, the unity of elements can be static or dynamic. Dewey's "morphological unity in variety, is static, extraneous, superimposed upon materials that do not actually share in it"³⁸. Form, in turn, is a dynamic organization. It takes time to complete it, there is growth, inception, fulfillment. Fulfilling and consummating are "continuous functions, not mere ends located in one place only"³⁹. Dewey introduces also the concept of "the esthetic form" and defines it through its function: "the esthetic form is when the material is so arranged ... that it serves immediately the enrichment of the immediate experience"⁴⁰. That corresponds to a larger assumption that the esthetic, implies, in much simplification, the immediate⁴¹. Whatever the differences, all concepts of form imply ordered relations of constituent parts, based on a sort of agreement among them.

To probe hypothetically the constitutive processes of Pure Form, we want to consider a possible theatrical situation when a high-pitched sound accompanies an act of violence performed against a red-colour background. Peirce

³⁴ W. Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas. An Essay in Aesthetics* (Warszawa: PWN, 1980), p. 220.

³⁵ D. W. Crawford, *Kant's Esthetics Theory* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), p. 98.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ J. Dewey, *Art...*, p. 117, 161.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

⁴¹ Cf. CP, 2:199; F. Sherif, *The Fate of Meaning* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 84; J. Dewey, *Art...*, pp. 50, 119, 293.

claims: "we cannot comprehend an agreement of two things except as an agreement in some respect"⁴². The agreement among the signs we discuss can be viewed as the agreement in the intensity of the sound, emotion and colour respectively. More exactly, it is the agreement in the intensity of the sensations the signs produce, where a "sensation" can denote both an impression upon the senses, or a certain emotional quality. Kant, while analysing sensations into matter and form states that "the matter of a sensation is its peculiar quality, while its form is its degree of intensity or magnitude"⁴³. "The logic of the form" can be, then, viewed as the relation among qualities of signs in their intensity. It can be said, then, that while "life-logic depends on the agreement of facts", "the logic of the form" consists in the agreement of qualities.

III

That was only a hypothetical insight into the nature of synthesizing processes of Pure Form in theatre, which, as a whole, may not undergo analysis.

Witkacy draws a parallel between theatre in Pure Form and instrumental music, insisting that in theatre we should experience "a metaphysical drama similar to the one which takes place among the notes of a symphony and only among them", or that "the actor, in his own right, should not exist ... he should be the same kind of part within a whole ... as the note C-sharp in a particular musical composition"⁴⁴. Zeman, discussing Peirce's categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness⁴⁵, presents the experience one has when enjoying a piece of instrumental music as a first and as such, unanalysable, since "a difficult thing about talking about first is that its firstness when it is grasped as a first, effectively evanesces"⁴⁶. Firstness is a mode of being of what is such as it is without reference to anything else⁴⁷; as a mode of cognition, it can be depicted as immediate consciousness, that is "... whatever of consciousness can be immediately given"⁴⁸, "passive consciousness of quality, without recognition or analysis"⁴⁹. The immediate, in turn, implies the unanalysable, the inexplicable, the unintellectual⁵⁰.

⁴² CP, 1551.

⁴³ D. W. Crawford, *Kant's Esthetic...*, pp. 97, 98.

⁴⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, pp. 77, 81; D. C. Gerould, *The Madman...*, p. 293, 296.

⁴⁵ Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, as modes of being can be viewed, in much simplification, as categories of possibility, reality and necessity, respectively, as modes of cognition — as categories of quality, fact and law (cf. CP. 1.23, 1.378, 1.537, 8.328).

⁴⁶ J. Zeman, *The Esthetic Sign...*, p. 243.

⁴⁷ Cf. CP, 832.

⁴⁸ CP, 1.310.

⁴⁹ CP, 1.377.

⁵⁰ CP, 5.289.

Pure Form can be viewed as a first not only on the account of a possibly chance convergence of the terms in Witkacy's and Zeman's statement. Witkacy insists that experience of Pure Form is the immediate, i.e. free from any analysing, comprehensive strategies, perception of the unity of a work of art⁵¹.

What is more, the effect that Pure Form evokes in the audience is to be the feeling of Unity in Variety and Variety in Unity. The means that it is the emotional aspect of the global interpretant that gets foregrounded⁵². That aspect of Pure Form, namely, its being a first in terms of Peirce's semiotics creates yet another possibility of relating it to the concept of the sublime.

Burke, contrasting the beautiful and the sublime, as the qualities of objects, states: "beauty should not be obscure, the great [i.e. the sublime — M. Z.] ought to be dark and gloomy ... the sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth and polished, the great rugged and negligent"⁵³. All those attributes of the sublime can be condensed in the statement that the sublime object is beyond grasp, it lacks definite contours, evades cognition. For Kant "the sublime is to be found in a formless object"⁵⁴, which may sound contradictory⁵⁵, still, he points out that "the totality of the object is present to the thought"⁵⁶. The paradox of "a formless object" can be solved through a distinction drawn between the faculties of a subject: to conceive of something and to "present" something⁵⁷. The imagination may fail to present an object that is present as a "concept" to the mind: "we have the Idea of the World (the totality of what it is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it.... We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate"⁵⁸.

The point of affinity between Pure Form as unanalysable in its constitutive processes and the sublime object as "a formless object", is, then, indeterminacy

⁵¹ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Czysta forma...*, p. 36.

⁵² In the case of complex signs, while considering their significative effect, one has to realize the co-existence of three separate aspects of their interpretant: the emotional, the energetic and the logical one (cf. CP, 5.475) and "(t)he functioning of separate interpretants of constituent signs within a ... macrosyntagm [a compound — M. Z.] brings about ... the foregrounding ... of the interpretants of such composite signs" (W. Kalaga, *The Literary Sign. A Triadic Model* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski Press, 1986), p. 91).

⁵³ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry...*, pp. 233, 238.

⁵⁴ D.W. Crawford, *Kant's Esthetic...*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cf. J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 77.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

of their presence that, however strongly felt, can never be reduced to definite area in space or time. That quality shows Pure Form and the sublime object as overlapping in relation to Peirce's category of Firstness. Most obviously, that parallel between Pure Form and the concept of the sublime requires more detailed discussion, which might be only initiated by our remarks.

* * *

The sublime impression consists in distress, uneasiness, it derives its pleasure from pain, afflicts with horror, enroots continually the ideas of extreme danger. When "art becomes identical with aggression"⁵⁹ that happens not necessarily through the images of bloodshed, as an act of violence exerted upon our senses or sensibility. Art can be aggressive when it is haunted with the potential of nothingness, void, affecting not the senses, but the instinct of self-preservation itself, and when the phase of reassuring harmony is achieved due to the processes which in their very nature are "unanalysable, inexplicable, ungraspable".

⁵⁹ S. Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Delta Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 121.